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ABSTRACT

A survey investigated the awareness and knowledge of English grammar among 141 English-as-a-Second-Language teachers and teacher trainees in Hong Kong. The questionnaire: (1) elicited background information on the subjects; (2) asked five open-ended questions designed to explore awareness and understanding of what grammar is; (3) elicited scaled responses to statements on the importance of grammatical knowledge, confidence in teaching it, and their own attitudes toward grammar as language learners; and (4) tested knowledge of grammatical terms and their use. Analysis focuses on comparison of results for native English-speaking (n=29) and native Cantonese-speaking (n=101) teachers and on subgroups of the native Cantonese-speakers in relation to educational background and teaching experience. Results are somewhat inconclusive, but point to a need for more in-depth study of individual teachers. Contains 14 references and 9 tables. (MSE)

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THE GRAMMATICAL AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE OF HONG KONG TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

STEPHEN ANDREWS

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THE GRAMMATICAL AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE OF HONG KONG TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Stephen Andrews

Introduction

This paper reports findings from a preliminary investigation into the grammatical awareness and grammatical knowledge of Hong Kong teachers of English and into their attitudes towards grammar.

Selection of this particular focus was prompted by a number of factors:

1. Whatever one's view of the value of explicit grammar teaching, the learning or acquisition of grammar remains central to the study of language;

2. In Hong Kong schools, despite the official adoption of a communicative approach to language teaching, explicit teaching of grammar has continued unabated.

Research into the level of grammatical awareness and knowledge that Hong Kong teachers of English bring to the teaching task seems especially timely in view of the current concern about the proportion of teachers employed as English teachers in local secondary schools who do not possess a relevant degree. A 1989 Education Department report estimated that 46% of teachers of English are not subject-trained (education Department 1989:60). It is, of course, a matter of debate as to what constitutes appropriate subject-training for such teachers. It could be argued, for instance, that a degree in English which has concentrated mainly on the study of literature is not necessarily an adequate basis for a career as a teacher of English language. Nevertheless, the underlying worries about the possible consequences of a lack of subject-knowledge seem perfectly understandable and worthy of further investigation.

Background

In the 1980s, in the UK in particular, considerable attention began to be given to 'Language Awareness.' This was partly in response to the ideas proposed by Hawkins and others in the early 80s that 'Language Awareness' should form part of the school curriculum: that explicit knowledge of forms of language, the structure and development of language, language in use, and L1 and L2 acquisition might help, among other things, to provide a bridge between the teaching of the mother-tongue and of foreign languages (Hawkins 1981, 1984, Donmall 1985). Then, in the mid- to late 80s, a succession of DES reports on the teaching of English as a mother-tongue, beginning with *English 5 to 16: Curriculum Matters*

1 (DES 1984) and culminating with the so-called Kingman report (DES 1988), argued for pupils to be taught more directly about the forms and structures of the English language.

These reports served to fuel the growing interest in language awareness. A 1989 British Association for Applied Linguistics Seminar took language awareness as its theme. Then, a year after the publication of selected papers from that BAAL Seminar (James and Garrett 1991a), the journal *Language Awareness* was launched, with the declared aim to encourage and disseminate work which explores:

1. The role of explicit knowledge about language in the process of language learning;

2. The role that such explicit knowledge about language plays in language teaching and how such knowledge can best be mediated by teachers;

3. The role of explicit knowledge about language in language use.

In the last few years, in part resulting from the debate surrounding the Kingman report and the associated LINC (Language in the National Curriculum) teacher-training project, there has been increased interest in and research into the language awareness of practising teachers, particularly of English as a mother-tongue and of foreign languages (see, for example, Mitchell and Hooper 1991). In relation to teachers of English as a foreign language, by contrast, there has been relatively little published research (though see, for example, McNeill's work on vocabulary and also Andrews, in press).

The present study focuses specifically on teachers' awareness and knowledge of grammar, but what exactly is understood by these terms in the context of this discussion? In Andrews, in press, trainers of English native-speaker teachers of EFL were asked to characterise the grammatical knowledge and awareness of teachers. Table 1 indicates the range of aspects mentioned.

The variety of responses of the trainers reflects the multifaceted nature of language awareness (see, for example, Stainton 1992) and illustrates something of the complexity surrounding any attempt to define what it is teachers of EFL should know/understand/be aware of/be able to do in relation to grammar. Clearly some of the points raised relate more to grammatical knowledge, others to grammatical awareness, while some seem to involve aspects of technique as well.

James and Garrett discuss five domains of language awareness: the affective, social, 'power', cognitive and performance domains (James and Garrett 1991b). The results discussed in the present paper focus principally on the cognitive and performance domains - grammatical knowledge in the sense of being able to understand and apply grammatical terms correctly - although reference will also be made to the affective domain and responses throwing light on:

1. Teachers' views of the importance for teachers and learners of knowing grammatical rules and terminology;

2. Teachers' confidence in their own knowledge of grammar/about grammar;

3. Teachers' attitudes towards grammar as learners of a language.

Table 1

Components of EFL Teachers' Grammatical Knowledge Awareness:

the Views of Trainers

What Characterizes Grammatical Knowledge/Awareness?
1. Knowledge of grammatical terminology
2. Understanding of the concepts associated with terms
3. Awareness of meaning/language in communication
4. Ability to reflect on language and analyze language forms
5. Ability to select/grade language and break down grammar points for teaching purposes
6. Ability to analyze grammar from learners' perspective
7. Ability to anticipate learners' grammatical difficulties
8. Ability to deal confidently with spontaneous grammar questions
9. Ability to think on one's feet in dealing with grammar problems
10. Ability to explain grammar to students without complex metalanguage
11. Awareness of 'correctness' and ability to justify an opinion about what is acceptable usage and what is not
12. Sensitivity to language/awareness of how language works

Methodology

The research strategy adopted in this instance was that of the questionnaire. It was felt that this would enable a wide range of information to be collected from a large number of respondents, with the possibility that their responses would bring to light a variety of interesting possibilities for further, more in-depth study.

The questionnaire was administered to 141 teachers and prospective teachers of English, the majority of whom were enrolled on courses of initial teacher-training. Of the 141 respondents, 101 were native-speakers of Cantonese, 29 were native-speakers of English, 9 were native-speakers of other languages, while two failed to specify their native language. The native-speakers of Cantonese were in the main practising teachers in Hong Kong secondary schools, but without much experience,

while the native-speakers of English (most of whom were based in the UK) generally had no teaching experience.

The response rate from the Cantonese native-speaker teachers was 100%, because the questionnaire was administered to them during one of their classes at the University of Hong Kong. The English native-speakers, by contrast, were a self-selecting group. Therefore, they may well not be representative of English native-speaker teachers of EFL as a whole. This hypothesis would appear to be borne out by the comment of one such respondent, written at the bottom of the questionnaire: "Many people didn't do this test as they felt it would be a test of their grammar, which they didn't feel too confident of, so maybe it's not a very representative sample." The suggestion that many English native-speaker trainee teachers of EFL lack confidence in relation to grammar accords very closely with the experience of their trainers, whose responses indicated that "...a large number of native-speakers begin their careers as EFL teachers with a marked lack of confidence in their own knowledge/awareness of grammar, experiencing feelings variously described as insecurity, inadequacy, fear and panic" (Andrews, in press).

Before discussing the results of the questionnaire, the design should be described. The questionnaire was made up of four sections:

1. Section A contained a number of personal detail questions eliciting data about respondents' language background, educational background and teaching experience.

2. Section B consisted of five open-ended questions designed to explore respondents' awareness and understanding of what grammar is (e.g. What are *rules* of grammar? What does it mean for a *learner* of English to 'know' a grammatical rule? What does it mean for a *teacher* of English to 'know' a grammatical rule?). The results from this section have yet to be analyzed.

3. In section C respondents were asked to consider a number of questions or statements and to record their replies using a five-point scale. The first set of questions elicited views on the importance of grammatical knowledge for teachers and for learners. A response of 5 represented "very important", while a 1 indicated a "not at all important" rating. The second group of questions elicited respondents' assessments of their confidence in their own grammatical knowledge (5 = very confident, 1 = not at all confident), while the third focused on their attitudes to grammar as learners of a language (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree).

4. Section D represented an attempt to obtain information about respondents' understanding of grammatical terms and their ability to apply them correctly. The first two parts of this section were taken directly from a questionnaire developed by Bloor (see Bloor 1986a, 1986b) and known as the SPAM questionnaire (Students' Prior Awareness of Metalinguistics). Bloor's original questionnaire was administered to undergraduates in two British universities. One group of 63 undergraduates - referred to by Bloor as the

'linguists' - were just entering the first year of modern languages or linguistics programmes, while the other group of 175 - the 'non-linguists' - were second-year students of other subjects, but with some interest in foreign language study. In the first of the items borrowed from the SPAM questionnaire, respondents were given a sentence and were asked to locate within it one example of each of fifteen different parts of speech (e.g. countable noun, adverb, preposition), while in the second they were given four sentences and were asked to identify in each the word or phrase performing a specified grammatical function (e.g. subject, direct object). The third part of Section D was a task requiring respondents to supply appropriate metalanguage themselves rather than matching a given item to its exemplar, by providing labels for a number of different verb forms within a short piece of text. (See Appendix A for sections B, C and D).

Results

The first part of this section discusses the responses of the Cantonese native-speakers in comparison with those of the English native-speakers. In considering these results, it should be kept in mind that, as mentioned earlier, the English native-speaker group is probably not representative, a hypothesis which needs to be tested in further research.

The first set of responses (see Table 2) shows how the two groups rated the

Table 2

The Importance of Grammatical Knowledge

	English NS Mean	s.d.	Cantonese NS Mean	s.d.
1. Important to know grammar rules for a teacher	4.69	(0.54)	4.7	(0.50)
2. Important to know grammar rules for a learner	3.48	(0.91)	4.15	(0.89)
3. Important to know grammar terms for a teacher	4.55	(0.57)	4.27	(0.77)
4. Important to know grammar terms for a learner	2.86	(1.51)	3.01	(0.93)
5. Important to teach grammar to learners of English	3.59	(1.05)	4.18	(0.90)

importance of grammatical knowledge. Both groups considered knowledge of grammar rules and terms to be important for a teacher. Rules were felt to be more important than terms by both groups for both teachers and learners, while the English native-speakers gave greater importance to teachers' knowledge of terms than the Cantonese native-speakers did. One of the most interesting contrasts between the two groups of respondents can be seen in their assessments of the importance of grammatical knowledge for learners: both groups see the teaching and learning of grammar as important, but the Cantonese native-speaker respondents provide consistently higher ratings.

The responses set out in Table 3 show the levels of confidence expressed by the two groups. As one might expect, the responses of the English native-speakers reveal that the members of this group have greater confidence in their ability to speak and write correct English. The English native-speakers indicate that they have marginally more confidence in their speaking ability than in their writing ability, while the Cantonese native-speakers show more confidence in writing than in speaking. Otherwise, the levels of confidence are very similar, with the Cantonese native-speakers no less confident than their English native-speaker counterparts. The relatively high levels of confidence expressed by the former group are perhaps

Table 3

Levels of Teachers' Confidence

	English NS Mean	s.d.	Cantonese NS Mean	s.d.
1. Ability to **speak** correct English	4.62	(0.49)	3.76	(0.75)
2. Ability to **write** correct English	4.59	(0.50)	3.99	(0.69)
3. Knowledge of rules of English grammar	3.52	(0.57)	3.6	(0.74)
4. Knowledge of grammatical terms	3.41	(0.68)	3.37	(0.82)
5. Ability to explain a grammatical rule correctly	3.24	(0.87)	3.38	(0.87)
6. ability to think of good examples to illustrate a grammatical rule	3.48	(1.02)	3.34	(0.83)

rather less surprising than the similarly high levels expressed by the latter group, in view of the feelings of insecurity and panic referred to earlier. This would tend to reinforce the view that this particular group of English native-speaker trainee EFL teachers may be an unrepresentative sample.

The attitudes towards grammar of these two groups when learning a foreign language reveal some interesting points of comparison, as can be seen in Table 4. The contrasts contained in the first two sets of responses are possibly as one would have predicted, with the English native-speaker group paying less attention to grammar than the Cantonese native-speakers and the latter group finding it more useful to learn grammar rules by heart than the former. The fifth set of responses also shows a contrast which one might have anticipated, with the English native-speakers agreeing more strongly with the idea that it might be more useful to practise communication than to spend time on grammar. What is perhaps slightly surprising about this set of responses is the relatively high level of agreement expressed by the Cantonese native-speakers. The contrasting attitudes revealed in the third and fourth sets of responses were possibly less predictable: the English native-speakers show a stronger preference for grammatical explanations from the teacher, while the Cantonese native-speakers seem to have the greater enthusiasm for an inductive approach.

Table 4

Attitudes as Language Learners

	English NS Mean s.d.	Cantonese NS Mean s.d.
1. I pay very little attention to grammar.	3.21 (1.90)	2.22 (1.25)
2. I find it useful to learn grammar rules by heart.	3.07 (1.53)	3.63 (1.15)
3. I like my teacher to give grammatical explanations.	4.03 (1.35)	3.89 (1.08)
4. I like to look at examples and work out rules by myself.	3.34 (1.74)	3.72 (1.20)
5. I find it more useful to practise communication than to spend time on grammar.	3.79 (0.86)	3.22 (1.21)
6. I am very interested in the grammar of that language.	3.38 (1.18)	3.48 (1.15)

In those tasks which tested respondents' understanding of grammatical terms and their ability to apply them correctly, the Cantonese native-speakers performed better on two tasks out of three, those with the larger number of items and therefore likely to provide more reliable results (see Table 5).

Table 5

Knowledge of Grammar/Grammatical Terminology

	English NS Mean s.d.	Cantonese NS Mean s.d.
1. Ability to identify specific parts of speech (max. 15)	12.54 (2.30)	12.89 (3.47)
2. Ability to identify grammatical functions/relations (max. 4)	2.88 (0.93)	2.64 (0.70)
3. Ability to name verb forms (max. 30)	26.59 (3.72)	27.97 (5.29)

Again, one suspects that the difference in the performance of the two groups would have been greater if the English native-speakers had been a more representative sample, a suspicion which is lent support when one compares the performance of both groups with the performance of Bloor's respondents on the two common tasks (Table 6).

If one looks at the two left-hand columns first, perhaps the most striking feature is the generally poor performance of the English native-speaker non-linguists in Bloor's sample. On every item their results are worse than those of the English native-speakers in the present study, in many cases dramatically so. Given that a significant proportion of English native-speakers entering the TEFL profession are not subject specialists, these figures would tend to confirm that the present sample is not representative.

Across the two samples there are a number of interesting points of comparison including, for example, those where both Bloor's groups perform markedly worse than the groups in the present study (countable noun, adverb, definite and indefinite articles) and those where Bloor's non-linguists stand out (past participle, conjunction). Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of all is the generally good performance of the Cantonese native-speakers, especially since the sample includes a significant number of non-specialists.

Table 6

SPAM Questionnaire Results

(Comparison of Bloor (1986) and present study)

	Ling	N-Ling	Eng NS	Canton-ese NS
verb	0	5	0	2
noun	0	7	3	11
countable noun	38	43	7	12
passive	27	85	45	23
adjective	2	27	10	12
adverb	25	66	7	18
definite article	21	48	7	14
indefinite article	33	67	7	18
preposition	9	60	0	10
relative pronoun	17	68	10	18
auxiliary verb	44	54	38	46
past participle	21	45	14	17
conjunction	11	55	10	14
finite verb	41	56	48	42
infinitive	11	58	14	34
subject	0	4	0	1
predicate	88	92	65	73
direct object	8	42	7	3
indirect object	30	46	45	61

The second part of this section looks a little more closely at the Cantonese native-speaker respondents, i.e. the Hong Kong secondary school teachers of English. Three comparisons between different sub-groups within the sample of 101 were made to see if any interesting points of contrast emerged.

The first of these comparisons was between those respondents who had received their tertiary-level education in Hong Kong (of whom there were 55) and those who had studied at overseas universities (numbering 33). As can be seen from Table 7, those who studied in Hong Kong performed a little better than their overseas-study counterparts in all those tasks testing their understanding of and ability to apply grammatical terms correctly.

The second comparison was between those whose subject of study at tertiary level was felt to be relevant to teaching English as a foreign/second language (of whom there were 48) and those whose university studies were in an area considered not to be relevant (33 respondents). For the purposes of this comparison, those

respondents who said they had studied English or linguistics were placed in the first category. In an attempt to reduce 'fuzziness' and sharpen any potential contrasts, those who specified Education as their subject of tertiary study were excluded from either group. Nevertheless, an element of fuzziness inevitably remains, since the profile of the 'specialists' excludes such information as exactly how much English they studied, and what sort of English they studied (did their course, for example, focus mainly upon the study of literature?).

Table 7

Cantonese NS Teachers: Place of Tertiary Study

	Study in Hong Kong (n = 55) Mean s.d.	Study Overseas (n = 33) Mean s.d.
1. The importance of grammar	20.07 (2.44)	20.35 (2.95)
2. Confidence re. grammar	21.51 (3.55)	21.58 (3.92)
3. Ability to identify specific parts of speech	13.57 (2.37)	12.43 (3.79)
4. Ability to identify grammatical functions/relations	2.69 (0.71)	2.48 (0.63)
5. Ability to name verb forms	28.64 (4.73)	27.32 (5.30)

Table 8 shows the results of this second comparison. Not surprisingly, those whose tertiary studies included English or linguistics had noticeably more confidence in their grammatical knowledge. Their results were also better on two of the three tasks focusing on grammatical terms, although on the first of the three (that requiring respondents to identify specific parts of speech) they performed less well than the non-specialists.

The final comparison looked at respondents' years of teaching experience. Two groups were identified from within the original sample: those with up to one year's full-time experience of teaching English (of whom there were 22) and those with at least six years of experience (24 in number). As can be seen in Table 9, those with at least six years' experience were both more confident and generally better in their understanding of and ability to apply grammatical terms correctly. Once more, however, there is an element of fuzziness surrounding these results, since those respondents with at least six years' experience had also in the majority of cases already followed a course of initial teacher-training, while the less experienced group had not.

Table 8

Cantonese NS teachers: Subject of Tertiary Study

	Studies included English/linguistics (n = 48) Mean s.d.	Studies not relevant to TEFL (n = 33) Mean s.d.
1. The importance of grammar	20.13 (2.78)	20.13 (2.47)
2. Confidence re. grammar	22.19 (3.89)	20.61 (3.58)
3. Ability to identify specific parts of speech	12.82 (3.71)	13.25 (2.82)
4. Ability to identify grammatical functions/relations	2.80 (0.75)	2.36 (0.49)
5. Ability to name verb forms	28.92 (3.13)	27.50 (6.58)

Table 9

Cantonese NS Teachers: Years of Teaching Experience

	Up to 1 year's experience (n=22) Mean s.d.	Over 6 years' experience (n=24) Mean s.d.
1. The importance of grammar	19.68 (2.98)	20.26 (2.51)
2. Confidence re. grammar	20.73 (3.79)	23.25 (3.80)
3. Ability to identify specific parts of speech	12.59 (3.30)	12.71 (3.33)
4. Ability to identify grammatical functions/relations	2.42 (0.51)	2.70 (0.76)
5. Ability to name verb forms	25.81 (5.97)	28.45 (6.19)

Conclusion

Probably the first conclusion to be drawn from a preliminary study of this nature is that, because the results are tentative, one should not in fact draw any very firm conclusions beyond the need for much more research.

The comparison between the English native-speaker and the Cantonese native-speaker teachers of EFL reveals some interesting points of contrast. Although it has been suggested that the English native-speaker sample is not representative, the Cantonese native-speaker sample, by contrast, is considerably larger and rather more representative. It would therefore not be unreasonable to take the profile of attitudes, knowledge and awareness presented by this category of respondents to be fairly typical of Hong Kong secondary school teachers of English.

The differences between sub-groups within the population of Cantonese native-speaker teachers point to certain trends with, for example, the subject of tertiary study and the number of years of teaching experience appearing to have quite a marked effect upon a teacher's level of confidence in relation to grammar. One is left, however, with the realisation that the contrasts do not fall into conveniently neat patterns, that no single variable does consistently have a significant effect upon grammatical knowledge/awareness. There is clearly a great deal of variation between individual teachers, each of whom is an amalgam of different characteristics and the product of a range of linguistic and educational experiences, any of which, singly or in combination, may have had some impact upon that individual's grammatical knowledge and awareness.

Therefore, the final conclusion to be drawn from this preliminary study is that there is a need for in-depth research which looks more closely at a much smaller number of teachers. This research should aim not only to analyze what the subjects understand by grammar, grammar rules and 'knowing' grammar rules, and to examine their level of grammatical knowledge and awareness, but also, perhaps most interestingly, to investigate how their grammatical knowledge and awareness (or lack of it) impacts upon the classroom.

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